

FWP MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR GRAZING LIVESTOCK

Introduction

The following grazing standards represent the minimum required by FWP of a landowner who reserves the right to pasture and graze livestock (private and public land). These standards apply to all FWP funded projects; at times it may be necessary to provide more rest from grazing than described as minimum to meet specific wildlife or fisheries habitat objectives. The minimum is most frequently applied (without additional adjustment for wildlife and fisheries needs) on projects like conservation easements and Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Projects where the property remains in private ownership and agricultural use remains the primary objective. On FWP WMAs, wildlife production and habitat conservation are the primary objective and when livestock grazing occurs it is not unusual for the amount of rest from livestock grazing to exceed that required by the minimum standard. Also, on some areas where wildlife production is the primary objective, grazing intensity may be reduced to a level significantly lower than allowable by the minimum standard. These standards are designed to address management of both upland and riparian landforms.

Why a minimum standard?

Livestock grazing is the predominant land use in Montana. As the state's primary fish and wildlife management agency, FWP is actively involved with livestock grazing as it influences fish and wildlife habitats throughout Montana. About 2.4 million cattle are maintained in Montana. Livestock grazing occurs on

about 69% of the state's land surface. Potential impacts to fish, wildlife and their habitats caused by grazing are well documented in the literature. Also well documented are potential benefits for conservation that can be derived for some wildlife species through carefully planned livestock grazing strategies.

Conserving wildlife habitat while continuing livestock grazing typically requires management strategies that differ from those employed for the sole purpose of maintaining a sustainable livestock forage base that maximizes livestock production. One reason for the difference in management strategies is because vegetation is much more than a forage base for wildlife. Vegetation species composition, structure, and diversity are important aspects of cover essential to the survival and production of wildlife. Healthy riparian communities are critical not only for aquatic species but for proper channel and flood plain function.

Seventy-five percent of all Montana wildlife species rely on riparian areas for all or a portion of their live. This includes many species covered in the FWP's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Strategy. When livestock grazing occurs, it is not unusual for cover to be the population limiting factor for many species. Aldo Leopold referred to this concept of habitat quality as 'Quality of Landscape'.

Addressing cover is especially important in implementation of FWPs Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Strategy. It is therefore possible that a livestock operator may be employing a grazing strategy that maintains a sustainable forage base on most of the property, but may not be providing adequate forage, cover, or floral diversity for important fish and wildlife species.

Sustainable livestock production often employs grazing strategies emphasizing production and maintenance of grass species while placing less emphasis on the maintenance of forbs and woody plants. Many wildlife species require grazing strategies that emphasize healthy woody plants and availability of forbs and grass seed heads on at least portions of the landscape every year. The maintenance of robust woody vegetation and cover is also a very important component of healthy riparian systems. Healthy ecological systems are essential for a variety of aquatic and terrestrial riparian obligates.

The purpose of FWP's minimum grazing standards to achieve a balance between maintaining sustainable agriculture and quality fish and wildlife habitat on working ranches yet provide flexibility to conserve and protect habitat needs where they are the primary objective and agriculture is secondary. FWP has applied the standard successfully over the past 30 years on a variety of projects ranging from working cattle ranches to FWP WMAs. There are examples in Montana and other states where a grazing standard similar to FWP's is being applied by livestock operators independent of FWP.

Grazing Plan

Prior to grazing livestock the Landowner and FWP must agree upon and implement a grazing plan. A grazing plan includes a map of the pastures, a grazing formula specific to those pastures, the class of livestock, and other information pertinent to the management of livestock. Format for the grazing plan is included as part of the management plan template for conservation easements. The grazing plan will be included as part of the Management Plan for

easement projects, and will define the limits and extent to which grazing may occur. The Management Plan may be amended by mutual consent, as more particularly described in Paragraph II.E. of the Conservation Easement. For other projects the management plan will be included as an attachment to the grazing lease or contract. On conservation easements the grazing plan will be enforceable only on lands covered by the easement.

Upland Minimum Grazing Standard for Summer/Fall Systems

This standard applies to upland pastures in native plant communities (i.e. generally on soils that have never been plowed) and for all riparian pastures. The grazing plan must meet or exceed minimum levels of periodic rest from livestock grazing to allow native plants adequate opportunity to reproduce and replenish root reserves. The minimum amount of rest required for any pasture grazed in one year during the plant growing season is defined as rest throughout the following year's growing season (i.e. grazing deferred until seed-ripe), followed by one year of yearlong rest, as shown in Table 1. Each pasture receives only one grazing treatment per year, and the treatments are rotated annually as shown in Table 1. The growing season is defined as beginning with the period of rapid plant growth (generally early to mid-May) until seed-ripe for the latest maturing native grasses, such as bluebunch wheatgrass or western wheatgrass (generally early August). Because the exact dates can vary as much as a few weeks depending on the location in Montana, specific dates for livestock movement are developed for each project. Occasionally it may be necessary for the grazing system to allow for some livestock to be in the pasture scheduled for

the A treatment (Table 1) beyond the growing season.

A three-pasture grazing system is used as an example (Table 1) to show how the landowner might typically rotate livestock through pastures to meet the minimum levels and required sequence of rest from livestock grazing. In practice, the landowner is not limited to any particular number of pastures; many projects include more than three pastures. In some instances, sub-pastures are employed to meet riparian or other objectives on the land. If livestock are grazed, they must be moved through the pastures in compliance with these standards and the grazing plan. Where grazing occurs during the growing season, the three-treatments outlined in Table 1 are essential and the total number of pastures and/or sub-pastures will vary between projects.

Table 1. Livestock Grazing Formula using a three pasture approach as an example.

Grazing Seasons	Pasture 1	Pasture 2	Pasture 3
Year One	A	B	C
Year Two	B	C	A
Year Three	C	A	B
<i>When all treatments have been applied to all pastures, the grazing rotation begins again at year one.</i>			
A = livestock grazing allowed during the growing season; B = livestock grazing begins after seed-ripe time; C = rest from livestock grazing yearlong.			

Winter and/or Early Spring Grazing

In some situations, an early grazing treatment (prior to mid- May) may be considered. However, it must be kept in mind that grazing capacity and forage production in the year a pasture is grazed from winter to beyond mid-May, will be temporarily reduced. On projects where early spring grazing (prior to rapid plant growth) is combined with summer (active growing season) grazing the three grazing treatments described in Table 1 must be employed.

It is usually more efficient to manage winter grazing separately from spring-summer grazing. If livestock are to be grazed in a native range or riparian pasture in winter or early spring (generally December through early May), and a separate grazing formula is required, it must be coordinated with the summer-fall grazing system as follows: Minimum required rest in pastures where livestock are grazed and/or fed hay during winter is one winter of rest in every two (2) years. Hay, grain, salt, protein or other supplements will not be placed in riparian areas during winter or any other season. Minimum required rest in pastures where livestock are grazed in spring, prior to early May, is one spring of rest in every two years. Any pastures grazed later in spring than early-mid May require the greater amount of rest shown in the table 1. As a minimum, when grazing is limited to winter or the non-growing season period, a two-pasture alternate use approach is frequently used. The area designated for winter grazing is divided into two pastures and each year one pasture is grazed during winter months and the other rested and use is alternated from year to year.

During winter months cattle tend to concentrate in wooded areas (shrub or tree-dominated areas) for shelter. This must be kept in perspective when assessing the impacts to woody vegetation. It is often the case that with careful placement of hay, cattle impacts to woody vegetation can be kept to a small portion of the area. If this is not the case, it might be necessary to fence a portion of the woody vegetation to protect it from damage, but should only be done once efforts to control livestock distribution by other means have proven ineffective. An acceptable level of impact will vary depending on the objectives (i.e. a level of

woody vegetation impact acceptable for a working cattle ranch may be much different than for a WMA).

Scope

The goal is to include as much of the lands under easement as possible within the grazing system, but one must be realistic in recognizing the animal husbandry needs of a livestock operation. It may be necessary to set aside small areas as animal husbandry units to be used at the landowner's discretion. Such areas might include calving pastures, branding pastures, sorting pens, bull pastures, or holding corrals. As long as the majority of the lands involved are within a grazing system, meeting the minimum standards, this is acceptable.

Non-native Pasture

It is common for livestock operators to have pastures on their land that are non-native range. The landowner's goal is usually to keep these pastures productive as non-native pasture. The pastures typically are seeded with an exotic pasture grass or grass mix. On occasion forbs like dry-land alfalfa are included in the planting. The FWP minimum grazing standard does not apply to these pastures. In cases of non-native pasture a grazing strategy that is coordinated with the grazing system and meets the needs of the ranch should be worked out. In the case of crested wheatgrass pasture it may be necessary to allow grazing early (late-winter or early spring) each year to maintain palatability. In the case of other pasture grasses, such as smooth brome, a deferred approach works well; a pasture is grazed during the growing season in year one then deferred from grazing until near seed-ripe in year 2 (about the time such

grasses would normally be harvested as hay). This will maintain the productivity of the non-native species until replanting is necessary and in some cases maintain them as attractive feeding sites for large wild ungulates. It is important to keep in mind that these areas, unlike native range, are essentially cropland and whether grazed or left idle will eventually need some sort of agricultural practice to maintain their productivity.

It is usually best to leave irrigated pasture management to the landowners discretion. If important riparian is included in the field it might be necessary to fence the riparian zone from the irrigated pasture to protect it from livestock grazing. Usually grazing strategies employed on irrigated pasture are not consistent with proper management of key native riparian plants. In such situations it may be necessary to apply the guideline *Series entitled: The Need for Stream Vegetated Buffers Parts 1 through 3*, Montana Department of Environmental Quality 2008.

Livestock operators often place cows in hayfields during winter months. In such cases the field should be managed at the landowner's discretion and in some instances it might be necessary to fence out riparian from the hayfield to protect it from grazing.

Stocking Rate

Usually FWP does not require a maximum stocking rate as part of the grazing strategy on easements or Upland Game Bird Habitat Enhancement Projects. In such cases it is clearly stated in the grazing plan, that the maximum stocking rate will be ultimately determined by the operators ability to conform to the grazing

system. In other words the livestock numbers may increase as long as the plan can be followed and livestock movement dates are not compromised. Such an approach is consistent with the reality that, for most easement projects, the primary use of the land is agricultural.

Occasionally a landowner has requested that an upper limit stocking rate be established as a stipulation in the easement. As long as the number of livestock is realistic this is not a problem.

On lands owned by FWP any grazing that occurs will be at stocking levels determined by the agency and approved by the FWP Commission.

Mineral and Other Supplements

On privately owned grazing lands the landowner is given more discretion on locations for placement of mineral block than on FWP lands. However, regardless of land ownership the placing of mineral block within riparian areas will be strongly discouraged. On FWP lands the placement of mineral block will be described as part of the grazing plan. Supplements will be placed away from riparian areas, ponds, and roads. Rocky (stable soil) areas on ridge tops or in the trees are preferred sites.

On FWP lands livestock within pasture grazing systems are not to be fed hay.

Flexibility

Rarely, a severe environmental influence (i.e. fire, drought, grasshoppers) may require a one time deviation from the prescribed grazing plan. In such cases the landowner is to notify the local FWP representative of the problem. In a timely manner the local FWP representative, Habitat Section representative, and

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landowner will meet to discuss the issue and work out a solution. It is important to keep in mind that short term adjustments to the grazing plan must be the exception rather than the rule. Allowing grazing to occur in a pasture scheduled for rest is always a last resort. FWP has managed grazing systems across Montana through a variety of severe environmental events. This experience has shown that when a legitimate problem exists an alternative can usually be found that avoids grazing the pastures scheduled for rest.